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ABSTRACT

The relationship between phonics and linguistics is considered. Certain observations concerning each are offered by the author. Phonics generalizations from reading experts and from linguists are presented. It is noted that the linguists offer critical observations of phonics instruction mainly because so much confusion is present in the instruction about the relationship of sound and symbol on the level of teacher awareness. The author believes certain understanding provided by linguists are absolutely necessary in implementing any choice of approach made toward the teaching of reading. He emphasizes certain points which must provide the basis for any kind of phonics or neophonics instruction and which must be recognized in any kind of meaningful research activity. And he also suggests some basic insights from linguists that can be of use to teachers who use phonics and to researchers who wish to investigate the usefulness of phonics as a way of teaching reading. References are included. (NH)

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LINGUISTICS AND PHONICS*

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Recent years have witnessed a renewal of interest in phonics, as evidenced by the publication of such books as Hunter Diack's The Teaching of Reading, in Spite of the Alphabet (6), Mitford Mathew's Teaching to Read: Historically Considered (10), and, more recently, Jeanne Chall's Learning to Read: The Great Debate (4). The old "phonics" versus "look-and-say" controversy appears to be almost dead, for, to believe the critics, research findings seem to indicate that some instruction in phonics in the beginning stages of reading produces better results than no instruction in phonics. To a student of language, of course, this claim about the usefulness of phonics would appear to make sense in spite of what research does or does not say. It seems quite obvious that in order to learn to read, a child must somehow become aware of the connection between the sounds of human voices and marks made by human beings on paper to represent these sounds. In recent years too, certain people engaged in studying the reading process and devising methods for teaching reading have discovered linguistics. I use the phrase "seem to have discovered linguistics" quite deliberately, because I am not sure that they really have discovered linguistics. I note a lot of mouthing of linguistic terms at conferences,

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a readiness to use these terms in literature advertising various kinds of courses, texts, and reading series, and some willingness on the part of teachers and teacher-trainees to take a course or two in linguistics. Phonics is <u>in</u> and linguistics is <u>in</u>. To me they are two very strange bedfellows, and it is my purpose in this paper to comment on the relationship and offer certain observations.

Let me begin by turning my attention to what people in reading who have investigated some of the language content of phonics have had to say about that content. For example, Clymer (5), Emans (7), Bailey (1) and Burmeister (3) have been concerned with examining a body of lore called phonic generalizations. For many teachers, it would appear that a large part of phonics consists of a set of statements, or phonic generalizations, about language. Children must learn these generalizations so that they can use them to work out what sounds are represented by the marks they see in books. If the children can apply the generalizations to the marks, they should be able to read. The work on phonic generalizations by these investigators is of interest to us in various ways. First of all, it is of interest because the generalizations have been examined for their usefulness and found to be quite deficient. Many of the generalizations are useless because they are inaccurate, unordered, or circular: that is they are based on a misunderstanding of linguistic facts, or they are presented randomly to children, or they cannot readily be applied. And, finally, of course, as Stauffer (11) has pointed out, investigations have shown that teachers themselves do not know the generalizations, and, presumably, since teachers can read, one must ask if children really need to know the generalizations in order to learn to read anyway.

As a linguist, I could explain why much of the research on phonic generalizations achieved the inevitable results it did achieve, and, also why some of the research should not have been done at all, but this is neither the time nor place to pursue those issues. What <u>is</u> important for me to note is that reading experts themselves, not linguists, produced the evidence which suggests that much of the content of phonics instruction is valueless. Let us turn, then, away from the reading experts' evaluations of phonics in order to look at the total issue of phonics instruction from the viewpoint of a linguist.

When a linguist approaches the problem of understanding just what five-or six-year olds must accomplish in learning to read, he asks himself what abilities do children bring to the task, what the nature of the task itself is, and what special contribution can he make to helping both children and teachers in the task. First of all, what abilities do children bring to the task of learning to read? It so happens that there is one very obvious ability that is generally overlooked. Every child speaks the language. In fact, unless a child is very unusual--and by unusual I mean pathologically afflicted--he has usually been using an extremely sophisticated linguistic system for about three years when he faces the task of learning to read. This linguistic system is so complicated that no adequate grammars exist to describe it and no one knows exactly how it works. It seems presumptuous then to a linguist that anyone would attempt to <u>teach</u> something that no knows very much about. And yet it seems that teachers regularly treat six-year olds as though they were linguistically naive and attempt to teach them the language.

The second point to remember is that in learning to read, children

must learn a new system--a writing system--and the relationship of that system to one that they know already--the linguistic system. Every child must learn to relate the marks in books in front of him to the meaningful arrangements of sounds that he hears around him. Of course, he might not care to learn this relationship if such learning does not seem to have any pay-off for him, but, in every case, whether willing or unwilling, the task is the same. It can be conceived of as either one in which he starts from the spoken language he knows and finds out how it is written, which is essentially the approach advocated by such linguists as Bloomfield (2) and Fries (9), or one in which he figures out how certain written symbols may be pronounced, which is the typical phonics approach and the approach which has been advocated from time to time by various students of language, for example by Wijk (14) and Venezky (12). There are good arguments to support either approach and the choice of approach depends on one's preferences rather than on conclusive evidence from any discipline known to me, linguistics included. However, even though linguistics provides no grounds for making a choice, it does provide certain understandings which seem to be absolutely necessary in implementing that choice once it has been made. So the third and major point of this paper will be concerned with the nature of these understandings.

A very basic understanding that teachers must have if they employ any kind of phonics approach is a knowledge of the differences between phonics, a way of teaching reading, phonetics, the study of speech production, and phonemics, the study of how sounds function to convey meaning differences. In Linguistics and Reading (Chapter 5), Fries made much of the importance of teachers achieving an understanding of the

distinctions among these terms, and it would be well to revisit Fries frequently on this point so as to clarify the distinction. It would be well to do so, because confusion in this area is endemic in reading as any linguist can observe, usually after less than five minutes reading in the literature or attendance at a convention such as this one. I have already remarked that teachers have trouble enough with parts of phonics, but this trouble is compounded by the misinformation that abounds about phonetics. It would not be an overstatement to say that many books on phonics betray the fact that their writers either know almost nothing about phonetics, or have never thoroughly understood what they have been told, or have some kind of hearing difficulty. In working with teachers, I often find it extremely difficult to get them to hear how people really speak. Yet the same people quite often teach phonics and advise others on such matters as speech correction, remedial instruction, and so on.

Phonetic misinformation abounds and so do unproductive ways of looking at problems. For example, the whole mythology of long and short vowel sounds, as this is usually taught, can work only if some meanings other than the usual meanings of "long" and "short" are given to those terms. Likewise, the use of terms like "blending" and "digraph" seems to a linguist to be less than useful, for the best way of dealing with the beginnings of words such as bread and bled is surely not to set up sets of special blends but to show the relationship of these words to such words as bed, red and led, and to deal with the bread, bled problems as consonant sequences and not as mysterious blends. And the term digraph seems to derive from a mixture of orthographic and phonetic information, a hopeless mixture to which I shall return shortly.

Even worse does the phonetics become when the teacher meets the dual phenomena of dialect and maturation. There is little attempt to acknowledge the fact that every child controls a remarkably systematic phonology. Instead almost every child is found wanting, for it is the rare child indeed who does not get his speech "corrected" in one form or another. He is exhorted not to slur words, not to be sloppy in his enunciation, not to articulate sounds in one way but in another, not to mispronounce certain words which are said to be "habitually mispronounced", and so on, and so on. If he is really unlucky, he gets special attention in pronouncing final r's in here and far, even though he is from New England, or in differentiating which from witch, even though both words sound alike to him, or pin from pen, even though the teacher has her problems with these words herself, being careful to specify whether she wants a writin' one or a stickin' one, except, of course, when she's also working on final ng's, when she says writing and sticking. All this is so unnecessary, for there is absolutely no need for teachers to behave in such a manner. A child who comes to school in kindergarten or first grade has a phonological system which is quite adequate for him. He does not need improvement of that system, even if we knew how to improve it, and writing itself is systematic. The task in phonics instruction is one of systematically relating the two systems for the child, not one of trying to change the first system, a doubtful goal, or of making it like the second system, an impossible goal. Let me add that this second goal is impossible because the task is one of teaching children to read and not one of teaching books to talk.

A final basic objection is to any notion that a child has to be taught his sounds or taught the language. Time and time again we hear that little Johnny doesn't "know his sounds" and little Johnny is

enjoined to work harder to master them. It never occurs to the teacher to ask herself how little Johnny understands what she is saying to him, what, in other words, little Johnny must know in order to understand that he is being told to do something. What the teacher means is quite different from what she says. She wants little Johnny to be able to dissect words into patterns that she herself only dimly comprehends and that often as not violate good linguistic sense for a purpose which she believes is good but of which she has a totally inadequate understanding. It is rather surprising that so many Johnny's <u>do</u> learn to read even when they are taught by phonics methods, for most phonics instruction is a good testament to the resilience of children: they learn, as it were--Rudolf Flesch (8) notwithstanding--in spite of it rather than because of it.

The procedures used by teachers in phonics instruction often deserve as much criticism as does the level of phonetic awareness of teachers. Perhaps the biggest problem with the procedures in general is that they betray so much confusion about the relationship of sound and symbol. Letters are said to have sounds, children are supposed to speak like talking books, and normative judgments abound. Even when more enlightened writers devise exercises for teaching certain aspects of phonics intelligently, the classroom teacher can step in the way and destroy the good work. One fourth grade boy was asked in one exercise in which of the two words <u>suit</u> and <u>wool</u> did he hear the same vowel as in <u>boot</u>. His answer <u>suit</u> was crossed out by the teacher, who wrote in, in bright red ink for all the world to see, the word <u>wool</u>. Who should be teaching and who should be taught in such a case as this? But it is easy to see what the problem is: a confusion in the teacher's mind between writing and speech.

Again, a linguist must protest the almost vicious circularity of some of the instruction. By this I mean that the children must already have the skills they are being taught if they are to understand what the teacher is trying to teach them. For example, one writer on phonics gives a rather complicated rule for syllabication which says that "when there is one consonant between two vowel sounds, the consonant usually goes with the next syllable, if the preceding vowel is 'long', and with the preceding syllable, if the vowel is 'short' or has a sound other than 'long'". The words robot and robin are used as examples. It should be obvious that the rule cannot be used unless one already knows the values of the vowels in question, and, if one knows the values, there is no need to use the rule to pronounce the words.

I have deliberately taken a rather harsh view of phonics instruction for two reasons. One is very simply that such a view is required by what goes on in phonics. But the second reason is a mere personal one. Linguists have to some extent been associated with a method which looks like phonics instruction: elsewhere (13) I have called this method a neo-phonics approach. Both Bloomfield and Fries were extremely critical of phonics as it was practiced, but both wanted to stress the sound-symbol relationship which is at the heart of phonics. However, both approached the relationship from sound to symbol, whereas phonics instruction has proceeded in the direction of symbol to sound. I would argue that an equally valid approach for a linguist to take would have been a symbol-to-sound one, as Wijk and Venezky have done, so that all that Bloomfield and Fries did in effect was look at the old problem from the opposite direction; hence my use of the term neo-phonics. I think that the greatest contribution

of Bloomfield and Fries was not so much the idea that the direction might well be changed--for I am not convinced it need be--but their bringing to the problem of the sound-symbol relationship a good knowledge of linguistics and phonetics. This latter knowledge has been almost completely ignored I am sorry to say.

Let me conclude then by emphasizing certain points which must provide the basis for any kind of phonics or neo-phonics instruction and which must be recognized in any kind of meaningful research activity.

The first point is that a child learning to read can speak the language and has a vast knowledge of that language. He may speak a different dialect from the teacher, but that dialect is systematic. He may also be going through some maturational developments in his articulatory abilities, but we can do almost nothing about these and probably should not try to either.

A child's language is a fully integrated, well-functioning system. The written language that he must eventually read is also systematic. Teachers must try to understand <u>both</u> these systems, for their task is one of helping the child to relate them. Phonics should provide a systematic way of relating the two systems.

In order to provide this relationship, phonics instruction should not involve speech correction, because most of this is wrongly motivated, should not demand dialect change, because such change is almost certainly quite unnecessary, and should not perpetuate linguistic and phonetic misinformation.

Finally, the whole notion of deductive teaching needs to be reassessed in the light of a better understanding of the child's task and abilities, and those parts in such teaching which obviously contradict each other or are viciously circular must be abandoned immediately.

If "phonics" instruction, as Chall suggests, has indeed proved to be better than "look-and-say" instruction when the two have been put into competition, this is a remarkable fact, but I suppose a fact. How much better would a "scientific" phonics be than the pseudo-scientific one that we have at present I can only speculate. In this paper I have suggested that some basic insights from linguistics can be of use to teachers who use phonics and to researchers who wish to investigate the usefulness of phonics as a way of teaching reading. Let me conclude on a lighter, but not really less serious, note by saying that I marvel very often how wonderful children are to do what they do and to achieve what they do in spite of teachers, parents, look-and-say, phonics, linguistics, and all the rest of the mad world we surely live in!

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